Mill's *On Liberty*

Chapter I

Mill's Philosophical Commitments

- Mill seems to endorse ***three*** philosophical positions:
  1. **Utilitarianism** (last two lectures: *qualitative hedonism*)
  2. **Perfectionism** (1st lecture; review *Routledge EP* quote):

     *"*a moral theory according to which certain *states* or *activities* of human beings, such as *knowledge, achievement* and *artistic creation,* are good ***apart from any pleasure or happiness they bring*****,** and what is morally right is what most promotes these human *excellences* or *perfections.* It is a *teleological* morality with an ***objective*** theory of the human good [as opposed to *utilitarianism*, a teleological theory with a ***subjective*** theory of the human good, e.g., hedonism]." **Letter (1) v. Spirit (2)**
  3. **Liberalism** *(be it **egalitarian** [Rawls]* or ***classical** [Locke])*
     - Grounded on the value of ***individual liberty/personal freedom***.
     - ***Basic liberties:*** liberty of conscience; freedoms of speech, press and association; criminal-procedural protections; property; etc.
     - ***Institutional supports:*** the rule of law; a (written) constitution; judicial review; representative democracy; open markets; etc.

Tensions Among Them

- Before examining the *quality* and *depth* of Mill's endorsements of liberalism and perfectionism, we might want to consider some **tensions** that exist between these three commitments *in their **original** forms, before Mill has **reshaped** them*. I'll pair them off and use some concrete examples:
  1. **liberalism v. utilitarianism:** banning atheist writings in a pious community and interracial/gay marriage in a bigoted one, thus averting pains of offense/worry.
  2. **liberalism v. perfectionism:** content restrictions on speech promoting consumerism; prohibitions on unhealthy foods; mandatory Bach listening.
  3. **utilitarianism v. perfectionism:** dislodging people from positions of *comfort* (e.g., orthodox religious communities, like Amish) to further personal *growth*.

Mill's Liberalism

- Mill speaks of the historical threats to **individual liberty** and the ***two*** ways in which they were countered:
  1. legal recognition of certain basic liberties (e.g., bills of rights) and
  2. popular constitutional checks (e.g., an elected parliament). (6)
- As Mill notes, some in the Continental tradition (e.g., Rousseau) thought the latter made the former unnecessary, but he warns of the "tyranny of the majority," whether it is exercised by way of *state power* **or** "prevailing opinion and feeling," i.e., *social pressure*. (8-9; cf. ***Tocqueville****, who coined "tyranny…", etc.*)
- To guard against such tyranny, he suggests that the line between "individual independence and social control" be drawn according to "one very simple principle" (commonly called the **Principle of Liberty**) that would apply "whether the means used be *physical force in the form of legal penalties*, **or** the *moral coercion of public opinion*" (9, 14; cf. U 184-5):

Mill's Liberalism, cont.

"The sole end for which mankind are warranted, *individually or collectively*, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a *civilized* community, against his will, is to *prevent* ***harm to others***. His *own* good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.... Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign." (14)

- The Principle of Liberty is limited in application to ***mentally competent adults in "civilized" nations***. (Cf. CRG C-2 & 4.)
- Its practical implications fall into *three* categories (16-7):
  1. ***freedom of the mind***: liberties of conscience, thought, and feeling, freedoms of speech and press, etc.;
  2. ***personal freedom***: liberty of tastes and pursuits, free choice of life plans, freedom of action consistent with prevention of harm to others, etc.; and
  3. ***freedom of association***: combining and uniting with others consistent with prevention of harm to others.

Mill's Liberalism, cont.

- He ends discussion of these implications by stating: "no society in which these liberties are not, on the whole, respected, is free, ***whatever may be its form of government***; and none is entirely free in which they do not exist **absolute and unqualified**." (17)
- Mill bases his Principle on ***utility****:* "I forego any advantage which could be derived to my argument from the idea of *abstract right* as a thing independent of utility [cf. Kant]. I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions…." (15; cf. U 189)
- This position makes the tensions within his system of thought quite palpable: how can basic rights be **not only** "absolute and *unqualified*" (17) **but also** *conditional* upon "social expediency" (U 200)? **Which is it? Are they conditional or unconditional?**
- ***Part*** of the answer lies in the remainder of the quote I gave you above: "…but it must be utility in the ***largest*** sense, grounded on the ***permanent interests of man as a progressive being***" (15). To interpret this, we must turn to his perfectionism.

Mill's (Plural) Perfectionism

- As I have already argued, Mill's *qualitative hedonism* is an attempt to ***practice perfectionism*** **within** ***utilitarianism:*** the "higher pleasures" ("pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments") are precisely those related to the *development and exercise of the "higher faculties"* (U 138, 140; Letter v. Spirit; *instrumental* perfection).
- What *seems* to be an ***objective*** theory of the human good—the cultivation of ***intellectual and spiritual excellence*** is superior to the pursuit of ***sensual pleasures***—stays *just* within the bounds of a ***subjective*** theory of the human good (*viz.* hedonism).
- As we'll also see in OL C-III, Mill emphasizes the value of ***self-assertion***, the ***questioning*** of conventional values and ways of life, ***experimentation*** in both thought and living, and the kind of **intellectual and spiritual progress** that all of these bring.
- His character ideal is not narrow like Homeric ones (Achilles or Hector) but **broad**: Mill promotes the development of *strong*, *bold*, and *morally and intellectually courageous* personalities in ***all*** vocations (art, religion, politics, business, *sports~*, etc.).

Reconciling His Commitments

- As I have argued and will go on to argue in the next two lectures, Mill reconciles his *three* commitments in the following fashion:
  1. **He practices perfectionism *within* utilitarianism:** qualitative hedonism embodies the *spirit* of the former but remains (barely) consistent with the *letter* of the latter—*instrumental* perfectionism.
  2. **He builds liberalism *into* his perfectionism:** only *freely-chosen* (self-)development valued (65-6).
  3. **He has *faith* in human progress under liberalism:** freedom + education *will* yield development (78).